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ABSTRACT

Canada will face a serious teacher shortage in the next 15 years due to the aging of its teaching work force. A study of patterns of teacher supply and demand in British Columbia (Canada) interviewed key informants at the Ministry of Education, British Columbia College of Teachers, and British Columbia Teachers' Federation, and board officials and union presidents from 12 school districts. Findings include the "Canada Goose Syndrome"--rural teachers leaving isolated, rural school districts to pursue teaching careers in the south of British Columbia. These migrants are responding to the needs of urban school districts that are experiencing massive retirements. This syndrome will exacerbate the situation in rural school districts, which are already experiencing shortages of qualified teachers. Recommendations include providing financial and other incentives to rural teachers, opening a university in northern British Columbia, and linking years of experience with financial incentives. Other research indicates that the United States, Australia, and New Zealand have similar experiences. (TD)

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Following The Canada Goose: Teacher Supply And Demand Issues For Rural School Districts

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Abstract

This paper will examine trends and issues for teacher supply and demand in rural school districts. Specifically, it will outline a research study that investigated the needs of British Columbia, Canada school districts and the supply of preservice teachers by universities and university-colleges. The salient finding is the "Canada Goose Syndrome" that entails rural teachers leaving the isolated and rural school districts to pursue teaching careers in the south of BC to meet the needs of school districts who have experienced rapid retirement and will continue to experience massive retirements. This syndrome will leave rural school districts, already devoid of qualified teachers, without many teachers. Some evidence will also be presented from other provinces and countries that are also feeling the draw of the Canada Goose flying south.

The problem of teacher supply and demand has slowly crept up on many countries around the world[45]. University student enrollments have markedly increased in the last decade as young men and women are attracted to high-paying jobs and careers that require more than high school graduation. As well, universities are finding that people are returning to university after several careers to pursue careers that are rewarding and financially viable. In addition, as the standards for teacher certification are being toughened, faculties of Education are experiencing a glut of teachers who are returning for upgrading. On the other side of the tougher regulations is the increase in teachers retiring rather than having to return to university with two or three years of teaching left before their retirements. In the United States, it is predicted that the greatest teacher shortage in its history has begun and will reach a climax in the next five to ten years (Pipho, 1998) to the extent that there will be a 21 percent growth in teacher demand in the United States in the next decade (The National Council for Education Statistics, 1994). This demand means a projection for 200,000 teachers per year for the next decade. In other words, by 2006, the United States will require 2,000,000 teachers in order to meet this demand.

Australia is also facing a looming teacher shortage which may not be able to be met by university graduates and teachers-on-call. Indeed, when there is an increase in student enrollments, teacher retirements, and the number of "discouraged" teachers currently in the workforce, the supply of university graduates and existing supply teachers is insufficient to meet the demand. The Australian Council of Deans of Education (1998) predicts shortages in both elementary and secondary teachers in each of the next five years up to 2004. Specifically, they predict a shortage of 347 elementary teachers in 2001 and 1,439 in 2004, and a shortage of secondary teachers of 1,467 in 2001 and 3,097 in 2004. Lastly, the aging teaching force is expected to result in approximately 3,000 teachers retiring during the period ending in 2004.

In Canada, the situation is certainly no different. The 1995 Labour Force Survey by Statistics Canada showed that 60.8 per cent of the teaching force in Canada were over 40 years of age. (In British Columbia this percentage increases to 67.57—the highest in Canada with Quebec second highest at 65.3 per cent and Ontario third highest at 60.0 per cent). Thus, because most teachers retire at or around 60, Canada will face a serious teacher supply and demand problem in 2015 created by its aging teaching workforce. Not surprisingly, recent studies by the Canadian Teachers Federation (1999) and Statistics Canada project the possibility of a teacher shortage early in the next millennium in different regions of Canada. In addition, it is predicted that the number of bachelor degrees granted in 1997 across Canada will increase from the 1997 rate of 15,209 elementary and secondary degrees to the extent that an additional 10 to 20 percent will be graduated; however, even this increase will not meet the demand. Particularly affected is the province of Ontario, a finding confirmed by a recent study by the Ontario College of Teachers (1998) which predicts a dire teacher shortage in that province by 2003. For example, teacher retirements in Ontario increased from 4,650 in 1997 to more than 10,000 in 1998, with 41,000 projected to retire in 2003 and 78,000 (almost half the province's teaching force) by 2008. However, the number of applicants for teacher education programs in the province has declined from 20,000 in 1990 to 8,000 in 1997. Compared with the number of degrees granted, over 6,000, in Ontario, there is an immediate shortage in this province. Thus, shortages are predicted province-wide at both elementary and secondary levels, particularly in specialized areas such as French-as-a-second-language (FSL), Mathematics, Sciences and Technology, and Computer Technology.

The British Columbia Teacher Supply and Demand Consortium has been considering issues of supply and demand in British Columbia for several years. In May 1998 the committee called for further research into the patterns of teacher supply and demand. The committee

[45] Parts of the paper have been previously presented in verbal and written form to the British Columbia Teacher Supply and Demand Consortium by Drs. Frank Echols, Peter Grimmett, and Andrew Kitchenham.

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then approved a proposal for a pilot study utilizing a qualitative approach in December 1998. The research plan proposed site visits for the purpose of interviewing key informants at each location. The research plan included site visits to three agencies with a Province-wide mandate; the Ministry of Education, the British Columbia College of Teachers, and the British Columbia Teachers' Federation. In addition, board officials and union presidents were to be interviewed from a purposive sample of twelve school districts selected according to size, stability of enrollment and geographical location. The research team believed that face-to-face interviews would ensure a timely and rich data source. This would provide the committee with a better understanding of the dynamics of teacher supply and demand at the regional and local level. The results of the pilot study are beyond the scope of this paper(Echols, Grimmett, & Kitchenham, 1999a; Echols, Grimmett, & Kitchenham, 1999b); however, a discussion of the rural school districts surveyed will constitute the body of this paper.

The Canada Goose Phenomenon

Historically, British Columbia has had chronic shortages in certain subject area specialties. Typically, teacher education programs have had a shortage of applicants in secondary Math, Physics and Chemistry. There generally has been a surfeit of applicants in Social Studies, English, Physical Education, and Humanities and, to a large extent, Biology. The demand for English as Second Language teachers is a more recent phenomenon and one that predominates in the metropolitan and some urban areas; however, the demand for First Nations Language and First Nations Culture teachers is strongest in the rural school districts. Shortages in the field reflect, in part, the characteristics of those who choose to enter teacher education programs. Sixty-two percent of new graduates certified in 1993 and 1996 have Bachelor of Arts degrees. Degrees in the Liberal Arts do not have direct linkages with the occupational structure that are more characteristics of Math and Science[46] majors. Teaching offers an attractive opportunity to university graduates struggling to obtain employment. It is relatively easy to be accepted into a program, the technology is not complex, and it provides a source of income. Although a number of individuals are committed to the teaching provision at an early age, a number make a late decision to become a teacher. Earlier research indicates these late decision-makers are more likely to be attracted by the extrinsic rewards of teaching rather than the intrinsic rewards. Recruitment to the profession through volunteer entry to teacher education programs appears to be a "passive" approach to teacher supply. This passive approach to the selection and recruitment of teachers may perpetuate some of the more immediate supply problems at the secondary level that we have discovered in British Columbia's schools. Additional factors such as the economy, government legislation, the number of teachers moving into the province, and immigration from other provinces and countries are unknown variables that have a significant impact on teacher supply and demand.

The research team bore in mind many of these factors when they began interviewing the Registrar of the British Columbia College of Teachers, the Research Department of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, the Ministry of Education, and each of the twelve school district personnel. The primary responsibility of this researcher was to travel several hundred kilometers to two rural school districts and interview school district personnel. It is during these interviews that the "Canada Goose" phenomenon became apparent.

As many people are aware, each year, tens of thousands of Canada geese fly south for the winter so that they can enjoy a better quality of life. So, too, it would appear that as the need for more and more teachers increases, so will the exodus from rural and isolated school districts. If one looked at the predictions for teacher shortages in British Columbia, which range from 5,000 to 20,000 by 2005 depending on the aforementioned factors of early retirements, an aging teaching population, university graduates, and economy swings (Echols, Grimmett, & Kitchenham, 1999a), it is abundantly clear that there will be for more jobs available in the province, in general, but more importantly, in the metropolitan and urban centers. In short, the teachers will flock to the areas that need teachers and that have amenities such as hospitals, theatres, police, fire, and ambulance forces, teacher resources and support, universities, and, probably for the shopping facilities.

Although it was outside the parameters of the study, this researcher interviewed rural teachers in secondary and elementary schools. Some interesting comments were made by these extremely dedicated teachers. As one teacher said, "Once I have put in two or three years in this district, I am out of here." When queried as to where he would go, he stated that he would go to the Lower Mainland and be a substitute teacher until a full-time contract was offered. Another said that she loved teaching in the north but felt that she needed more resources as a teacher but she also believed that she needed to travel a great distance to get further teacher training. When asked if she had those two needs met would she stay in this district, she replied that she would much rather live in a metropolitan area just to be close to crowds! This researcher asked an entire staff about the possibility of "migrating" to the urban areas should vacancies arise and the responses were virtually unanimous: "in a shot"; "tomorrow"; "you better believe that I would be gone"; "sadly, yes, I would go south." A more detailed response brings out the sentiment of many rural teachers with whom this researcher spoke: Don't get me wrong. I love teaching in [this district] and have

[46] A member of the Physics department at the University of British Columbia indicated that they graduate approximately 250 students a year among their various programs. Graduates can usually command a starting salary in the $70-80,000 range.

lived here for fourteen years but I also know that the metro areas offer far more for me and my family than here in [this town].... I mean if an urban or metro school district wants to be pay me the same pay cheque every month as I get here then why would I want to stay here.

... Sure the cost of living is higher in the city but so is the standard of living. Right now I drive for three hours round trip to get from my house to my school and back so I could live in the suburbs in Vancouver and commute to four school districts and drive for less time. ... *The rural school districts have to get their act together and start offering some reasons to stay* (emphasis added).

These sentiments were heartily shared by most of the rural teachers on three different school staffs in two different school districts. The notion that teachers will leave a rural school district to find work elsewhere is certainly not new; however, the vast numbers of teachers who will leave rural areas to teach in metropolitan and urban districts is great. In short, the future for rural schools and children appears to be quite bleak in the next ten years.

Conclusion

So what are the answers if we know that the rural school districts are going to suffer greatly when the teacher shortage hits in British Columbia? The first answer comes from a superintendent of a large rural school district: "Give us more money." Certainly, money would be a major incentive for teachers to stay. It was a consistent feeling that teachers enjoyed teaching in rural districts but that they really felt a sense of inequity as they could teach in another district and earn the same amount of money. To be sure, some of the general incentives in the United Kingdom and New Zealand may be modified to attract and retain rural teachers. Examples in the United Kingdom include 325 million dollars to boost recruitment, $12,500 to train teachers in key shortage areas (i.e., math and science), 25 million dollars for those subjects where shortages occur in the secondary levels, providing on-the-job training for teachers in specialty areas, implementing a system of merit pay regardless of where the school is located; in New Zealand, some general incentives are scholarships to future teachers of high demand subjects, financial incentives for high-need schools and teaching areas, and money for relief teachers orientation and training (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999). Another superintendent suggested another incentive for rural teachers would a university to serve the needs of the rural school districts: "Those aren't the kind of recruits we need or find are the most successful here. I think we need a program in the north. I think UNBC would be well advised to get with it and offer an elementary teacher education program." That is, if a university were opened in the northern part of British Columbia, many teachers would feel support was present for inservice and professional development. A corollary would be that teachers trained in rural education in a rural setting would most likely stay in a rural district. In addition, a university in situ may also create opportunities for graduate work which would mean many teachers would not have to travel out of district to receive graduate training. Lastly, linking years of experience with financial incentives was another salient finding from this study. In other words, a teacher moving from the first step on the grid to the next (i.e., second-year teacher) would receive a pay increase of two thousand dollars; however, a teacher moving from step five to six, six to seven, or seven to eight would receive a pay increase of five thousand dollars. It would be worthwhile for the teacher to stay six or seven years as the financial incentive removes the inequity possibility with more urban districts as teachers tend to receive an average increase of two thousand dollars for each year of experience. In sum, there is a need for teachers to be attracted to teach in rural school districts and a stronger need to retain teachers in rural school districts because teachers will be leaving and few will be filling the vacancies when there exist so many other positions in urban and metropolitan districts. The challenge in the few years that are left before the impending and massive teacher shortage occurs is to find answers and incentives. Some Canadian geese do stay home for the winter and many survive, if they have the desire.

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